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Humanistic Management: an alternative way of organising

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Cover image: A Gaudi mosaic: photo by Christina Schwabenland

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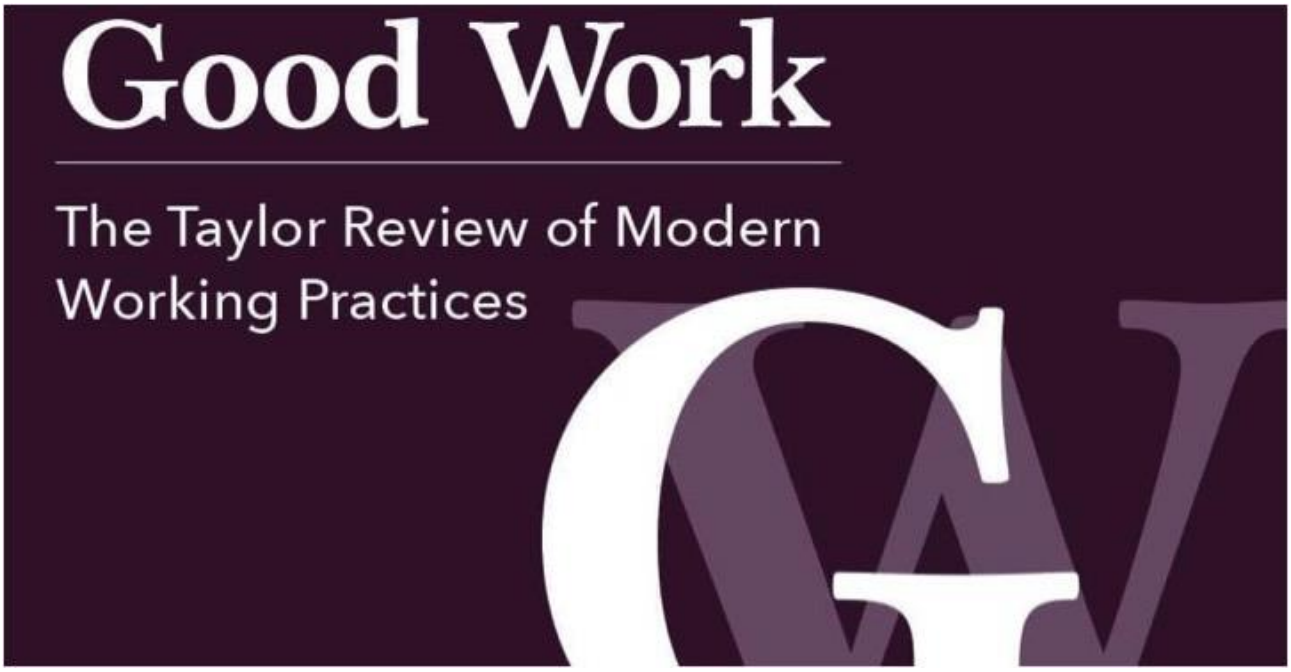
an alternative way of organising?

Christina Schwabenland and Paul Harrison

How this special edition came about

Last November (2017) Paul Harrison and I (Christina) launched the UK Chapter of the Humanistic Management Network (HMN) at the Young Foundation in London with a line-up of great speakers. We had Matthew Taylor from the RSA talking about his report for the government on Good Work, Loughlin Hickey from Blueprint, Mary Hodgson from The Young Foundation and Ernst von Kimakowitz, one of the founding members of the international network, and convener of the Swiss Humanistic Management (HM) Chapter.



Somewhat surprisingly, to us at any rate, the Humanistic Management Network had thirteen national Chapters, but none in the UK. We felt there was a need, not so much out of a deep engagement with the philosophy and underlying principles of humanism, but more out of a sense that organisations are becoming hard places to be for many people. Our evidence is largely anecdotal (and experiential), but here is just one, disturbing statistic: according to a Gallup poll in 2017, 87% of employees are 'not engaged' at work. If this is true, we find that shocking. All that potential, commitment, enjoyment, creativity that comes with a sense of fulfilment and purpose, and of being valued at work, lost. What unhappiness must lie behind that statistic? And for what? Are organisations more productive, more profitable, more effective, if their employees are miserable? It seems unlikely.

So, is there a need, perhaps, for a UK Chapter? But what might the new Chapter do, and what exactly did we mean by 'humanistic management'? The November 2017 launch could only begin to address these questions.

However, at that launch, we met Bob MacKenzie from the Association for Management Education and Development (AMED) and began to discuss overlapping areas of interest and concern. From these discussions, the opportunity arose to jointly create a special issue for AMED's journal e-Organisations and People (e-O&P). We saw this as an opportunity to continue the debate, to develop our ideas about the role and importance of humanistic management in the UK. We could also explore its relevance and boundaries with overlapping ideas and concepts, and begin to consider what a UK branch of the international humanistic management network might achieve.

Our collaborative commissioning, writing and editing process

Our partnership with AMED began with a joint workshop in April 2018 to bring together potential contributors and to give some initial shape to the special edition. From the start, this collaboration with AMED has been in itself a model of what might be viewed as humanistic management in practice – in particular, AMED's approach of 'critical friendship' (e.g. MacKenzie 2015) as an alternative to the more usual blind peer review that those of us working in academia are all too aware of. For e-O&P, critical friends work directly with authors on a one-to-one basis as the texts develop; sharing a joint commitment to excellent writing, scholarly practice and clarity of expression, offered through encouragement and suggestion. This model is not unique to AMED: the critical management studies group VIDA (a network which is open to any with an interest in critical management who identify other than cis-men) has also pioneered critical friendship as alternative to traditional peer review. We hope our contributors to this edition will agree that this process of critical friendship has been rigorous (some articles have gone through five iterations to reach the clarity that you will see here) but that it hasn't been of the kind that makes you hide the reviews away in a drawer for a few days after receiving them until you feel brave enough to go through the detail. (Are there any writers out there who have shared that awful experience?).

Some thoughts about our theme

The purpose of this miscellany is to explore the potential and viability of a UK Chapter of the Humanistic Management Network, to carry on the conversation, and to draw attention to the dialectic between the range of different understandings of the concept that we present here, and to its underlying coherence. We are still feeling our way, and we do not have a single, all-encompassing 'definition' of what humanistic management is. Rather, we see its meaning as contextual - as emergent and fluid. We do not claim to be 'experts'; we are people who work in management, study management, experience management and care deeply that it should be humane.

Questioning the alternative

Our theme contains the idea that humanistic management is not mainstream, that it is 'alternative'. Of course the principles of humanism are hardly new, and indeed in many ways are not radical at all. Humanistic thinking has a long history in the UK, and in management terms, can be traced as least as far back as the deeply influential human potential movement and Maslow's formulation of a hierarchy of needs (1943). Such influences led, among other things, to the work on action research developed through Surrey and Bath universities (e.g. Smith 2007), the growth in interest of self-directed learning, reflective practice and more. More recently, the growth of interest in Fredric Laloux's (2014) model of 'teal management' promotes the importance of peer relationships and systemic learning.

But our contention is that if humanistic management ideas really were mainstream, we would not have 87% of employees disengaged. We would not be hearing the stories that the #MeToo initiative is bringing to light. Bullying, harassment, and work intensification would be seen as intolerable - symptoms of something gone badly wrong.

Our suggestion is that even the notion of an 'alternative' has become challenging. We live and work in times where there is a striking disconnect between much of the management literature which supports the idea that humanistic principles make good business sense, that organisations should foster trust, creativity and the autonomy that workers can enjoy, when they know they are valued and appreciated. This runs alongside the increasing hegemony of neo-liberal forms of management, which promote the idea that there is only one way (David Zigmond's article in this issue exemplifies this well).

The dilemma posed by the 'business case', such as that made by Blueprint in association with the Health Foundation (2018), that humanistic principles are good for business as well as for people at large (although the Blueprint doesn't use the term 'humanistic' as such), concerns whether or not that argument should be its driving force. What happens when organisations which claim to adopt humanistic principles fail? Or when humanistic practices may incur additional expenditure? Do we need alternative rationales, appealing to ethical and/or moral values ('it's just the right thing to do')? And how radical should supporters of humanistic management be? Is humanistic management fundamentally reformist, sharing common ground with initiatives such as 'conscious capitalism' (e.g. Burden & Warwick 2013; 2014), or is it inherently more radical?

These are live questions, and we suspect there may never be complete agreement; Rather, we anticipate an on-going dialogue between principles and practice, and between pragmatism and challenge.

An overview of the articles

The seven articles in this issue each represent a contribution to these questions. Each makes explicit reference to humanistic management, but also presents the authors' theories-in-use about the different ways in which humanistic management is being conceptualised. The order in which they are presented is also significant. We have paired six of the seven articles together, so that each pair can be read as creating a dialogue. These articles are drawn from practice, they provide exemplars of what humanistic management is – and, in the articles by William Tate and David Zigmond, what it is not. The seventh article, by John Rosling, is more abstract, and serves to present a model to interlink these disparate ideas together.

The first two are each engaged in an exploration of the ways in which organisations can support women and reproductive health. When **Ilaria Boncori** became pregnant, she was able to draw on a rich – and unusual – resource. This consisted of the stories she had collected earlier from parents as part of a research project into parenting and work. Within these stories, she found inspiration for tackling issues around workload, returning to work after her daughter was born, and in the subtle, but necessary, work of identity negotiation as she sought to integrate her newer identity, that of mother, with her long-standing roles of researcher and teacher. Her organisation, which runs an on-site crèche, was also broadly supportive. This article provides an exemplar of a life-changing situation that was well managed and integrated, to the mutual benefit of all stakeholders.

Lara Owen's article similarly tells the story of her work to facilitate an organisation, Coexist, to negotiate a new policy on menstrual health. Lara writes:

> *'the progressive ethos of the organisation, committed to humanistic and broader ecological values, meant that there was a desire to encourage and support women to honour the menstrual cycle rather than to feel they had to suppress, deny, or minimise it'.*

Ilaria's and Lara's articles both explore ways in which employers and employees alike can find ways of being whole people at work, rather than compartmentalising different aspects of their being which then, almost inevitably, conflict. A humane organisation, by this reckoning, is one that can deal with the whole person, including the realities of their embodied selves, rather than labelling some aspects of self as irrelevant or even detrimental to its needs.

Ruth Slater and **Jayne Mizon** have co-authored an article about an initiative to identify an organisation's values 'bottom-up', rather than, as in so many organisations, being led by senior management. They describe the processes they developed, and show how certain values were seen as irrelevant by staff, who were also able to suggest values that the senior management had not considered. Ruth and Jayne write that:

> *'there is little merit in values which do not support the business. There is little merit, too, in values that do not reflect employees' experience of the company'.*

Here we see a different kind of integration, not of the different aspects of self, but of the different layers and functions within the organisation.

Ruth's and Jayne's article provides a nice counterpoint to **Rob Warwick**'s description of his experiences of teaching ethics to undergraduates in a business school. Both articles are exemplars of participatory approaches to values and ethics, and both describe action learning in process. Rob captures some of the sense of this in his use of the metaphor of 'foraging':

> *'for me'* he writes*, 'the image of "breadcrumbs" conjures up the image of a trail left for students, head down, bird-like, pecking the ground, taking one step after another with little thought to or active engagement with one's surroundings. "Foraging" is different: foragers are heads up, exploring in different directions, coming together to discuss, exchanging ideas and understanding. It is a constant sensing and negotiating of one's context'.*

These articles are rich in their observations about humanistic management in practice. What the 'foraging' metaphor suggests to us is the importance of teachers or managers being able to let go of control, to trust to processes of involvement and empowerment, and to have the courage necessary to allow the unexpected to emerge.

The next two articles present a very different picture; their articles each illustrate what humanistic management is not. These are the horror stories; immense suffering, careers and reputations damaged, if not destroyed, and the consequences of fighting institutional injustices. They share an interest in accountability which, in these stories, seems to be everywhere and nowhere. **William Tate**'s story, concerning the case of Dr Hadiza Bawa-Garba, a doctor in a paediatric unit who was on duty when a child died. The case illustrates the complexities of accountability within an organisation suffering numerous systemic failures. Where is individual responsibility under such circumstances? And how can we account for ourselves and be accountable to others in a way which does not separate the person from the systems within which they are located? Can systems be more or less humanistic? **David Zigmond** narrates a system that has become profoundly un-humanistic in its attempts to tackle these very issues. His Kafkaesque story is about the need to be accountable to regulatory bodies for the upholding of standards. It is one of systems dominating people, systems out of control. And yet, in his imaginary dialogue with the more human face of the regulators, he acknowledges the complexities of accountability in such complex organisations.

John Rosling's article takes a very different approach. While the other authors have all written about humanistic management (or its opposite) in practice, with all the messiness that such experiential accounts always involve, John's contribution is more abstract. Starting from the observation that the frequently proposed links between purpose and performance are more aspirational than demonstrated in evidence, he then develops a model to demonstrate how such links might actually be manifested in organisations. His proposition is that without ownership, trust and an understanding of context, a sense of purpose alone is not enough. Although his starting point is quite different from the other authors in this collection, his conclusions are very similar. Trust figures in all of the accounts, by its presence, in the first four articles, and by its absence in the two 'horror' stories. John writes:

> 'context-led rather than content-led management has been shown to be better adapted to fast-moving and ambiguous environments.'

This observation surely connects well to William's and David's stories of systemic failures.

So where are we now?

There is a richness to these contributions that cannot be conveyed sufficiently in a brief editorial – you have to read them all. But some themes do emerge quite clearly. These include the necessity of integration and ethical decision-making.

Integration

The first is the notion of integration between the different aspects of self at work, between different levels of management, between values/ethics/principles and experiences, between individuals and the contexts in which they work and live. This may not be a very radical proposition, but much of traditional management orthodoxy centres on separation – separation of function, role, work and home, mind and body, organisation and context/environment. But humans are all of these things, and humane management must entail a recognition and respect for the totality of the human being, and for the totality of the organisation.

Ethical decision-making

The Humanistic Management Network talks about 'ethical decision making' as being at the heart of humane management. When we talk about 'consequences' (and therefore about 'ethical decision making') do we think this is focused on consequences within an organisation for its people, or do we think this requires a much broader perspective? Do we think of consequences not just for humans within the organisation, but also for customers, suppliers, shareholders, and the wider society? If so, this then requires an organisation to understand its true purpose in society as a foundational requirement. Then, logically, this might encourage an organisation (as some do) to look for sources of established and emerging guidance as to what 'ethical' means in this wider sense, such as Sustainable Development Goals, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The presence and future of humanistic management in the UK?

Making a start? Launching the UK Chapter of the Humanistic Management Network, November 2017
[Photo: Christina Schwabenland]

Finally, is there a need for a UK group to promote humanistic management? The horror stories suggest yes. The contributions in this edition form the beginning of a debate which the UK Humanistic Management Chapter is taking forward. Specifically, we plan to organise a post-publication workshop in early spring 2019. We will be looking to establish a steering group to drive the next phase of the UK Chapter's development and to identify a programme of events. Putting together this special edition has been tremendously exciting; the breadth of articles, the enthusiasm of the authors, and the enormous support we have received from AMED has given us a firm foundation from which to grow.

Please join in our efforts to continue this co-inquiry.

Acknowledgements

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About the guest editors

Dr Christina Schwabenland is a Reader at the University of Bedfordshire Business School and convener the Humanistic Management Network UK Chapter. Prior to taking up an academic post in 2004, she worked for over 25 years in the UK non-profit sector in a variety of practitioner and management roles. Her research interests focus on organisations and social justice, with a particular emphasis on diversity management. Having experienced both the best and worst of organisations, she is profoundly committed to humanistic management.

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Paul Harrison is the volunteer co-ordinator of 'Humanists in Business' under the auspices of Humanists UK, the charity and campaign organisation (https://humanism.org.uk). Paul's interest in Humanistic Management originates from two sources: his interest in work psychology (he completed his MSc in Occupational Psychology in 2017) and a career in professional services. This included advising clients on ethical tax compliance and a range of senior management roles.

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About the Humanistic Management Network and AMED

The Humanistic Management Network (HMN) is an international group of practitioners and academics who share a concern that organisations exist to benefit society. Humanistic management is based on three principles; 1) respect for the dignity of each person, 2) ethical organizational decisions and processes and 3) on-going dialogue with multiple stakeholders. Humanistic management (HM) can be a driver for sustained business success and can reduce the cost of conflict, high levels ofContents stress-related absence, and the costs of raising capital. But HM principles are not shared by everyone and are increasingly under threat. As the newly-established Humanistic Management Network UK Chapter, we are very open to your suggestions and ideas about how we can develop and grow.

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